

# School Refusal or Avoidance

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# No case of school refusal is the same

- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Chronic Illness
- ▶ Family Circumstances
- ▶ Social Issues
- ▶ Academic Failure



# School refusal is an urgent problem

- ▶ School based problem solving and response is often much too slow
- ▶ Parents and educators need to be very proactive to address this problem before it becomes chronic.
- ▶ Research suggests that immediate intervention is crucial.
- ▶ Very easy for school refusal to become a long term problem.
- ▶ School should consider moving up their time line for evaluations and eligibility to address this sooner.
- ▶ Parents should be working with therapists, psychologists or other treatment professionals as soon as possible.

# Legal Considerations



Identify the problem- may be more than one thing causing the student to avoid school.

# Evaluations

20 U.S.C. § 1414

- (a) A State educational agency, other State agency, or local educational agency shall conduct a full and individual initial evaluation in accordance with this paragraph and subsection (b) before the initial provision of special education and related services to a child with a disability under this part.



- ▶ Evaluations are a critical element to identify and remedy school refusal or avoidance.
- ▶ Cost- effective
- ▶ The sooner the problem is addressed the more likely there will be a plan to address the school avoidance.
- ▶ This problem gets worse unless it is addressed quickly.

# Evaluations

- ▶ If a parent requests an evaluation and the LEA refuses, the LEA must provide prior written notice.
- ▶ School must obtain written parental consent before conducting the initial evaluation. Parental consent for an evaluation is not consent for the child to receive special education services.

Practice Tip: Parents should also seek professional help ( outside of school interventions ) if their child or teen is developing school avoidance behaviors.

Requests for evaluations must be made in writing.

Within the 14 school days after receiving the written request the district will decide whether to evaluate the child or not.

# The process

- ▶ Share letters, reports, or other materials that can help the school understand your child. Provide outside evaluations as soon as possible.
- ▶ Draft a timeline of events
- ▶ Evaluation and Reevaluation
  - ▶ Evaluation is defined by the regulations as procedures used to determine whether a child has a disability and the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the child needs.



# Evaluations



- ▶ School district has **60 school days** to conduct the evaluation. This is a very long time for a child with school refusing behavior.



# Eligibility



- ▶ Having a diagnosis does not automatically entitle a student to special education services.
- ▶ The disability must have an adverse impact on the student's educational functioning. ( e.g. if a student doesn't attend their academic performance will in all likelihood be affected).
- ▶ Student's with school refusal are often made eligible for special education under the category of emotional disability or other health impaired.

# Emotional Disability

- ▶ **Emotional Disability** (includes schizophrenia but does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:
- ▶ An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- ▶ An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
- ▶ Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
- ▶ A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- ▶ A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

# Other Health Impairment

- ▶ **Other Health Impairment** means having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment that
- ▶ is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, or sickle cell anemia; and
- ▶ adversely affects a child's educational performance.

# Eligibility

- ▶ Students may be eligible under more than one category.



# Development of an IEP

- ▶ In General. In developing each child's IEP, the IEP Team, subject to subparagraph (c) shall consider
  - ▶ (i) The strengths of the child;
  - ▶ (ii) The concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child;
  - ▶ (iii) The results of the initial evaluation or the most recent evaluation of the child; and
  - ▶ (iv) The academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child.
- ▶ (B) Consideration of special factors. The IEP team shall-
  - ▶ (i) in the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address their behavior.

# Development of an IEP (cont).

- ▶ Functional Behavioral Analysis- critical first step.
- ▶ What is the reason for the refusal?
- ▶ What interventions have been tried?
- ▶ Development of a Behavioral Intervention Plan.



# What works

- ▶ Pursuing truancy and legal avenues ineffective.
- ▶ Cognitive behavioral therapy.
- ▶ Age dependent- different responses for younger vs. older teens.



# Forced vs. Gradual School Attendance

- ▶ Kearney and Albano (2007) recommend only considering forced school\* attendance:
  - ❑ With younger students ( age 11 and under)
  - ❑ When the function of the school refusal behavior is attention seeking.
  - ❑ When you have parental support.
  - ❑ When the anxiety is more mild.
  
- ❑ For older students and those with severe anxiety, use gradual approach (e.g. start with favorite class and gradually increase time in school).

\* Evidence-Based Practices for School Refusal and Truancy, Mary Wimmer Ph.D.



# No One size fits all solution - Some

- ▶ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
- ▶ Intensive Outpatient program designed to address school refusal or avoidance.
- ▶ Online Classes as an entry point to accessing education with the goal of re-entry into an actual school.
- ▶ Coordination between home and school.



# Problematic Solutions

- ▶ Homebound Placement - usually results in worsening situation. Should be very temporary if is utilized.
- ▶ It is not an IEP placement.
- ▶ Limited to 5 hours per week.
- ▶ No therapy typically.
- ▶ Punitive approaches.



# Selected Resources

- ▶ School Refusal Behavior: Children Who Can't or Won't Go to School, George B. Haarman, PsyD., LMFT.
- ▶ **Evidence- Based Practices for School Refusal and Truancy**, Mary Wimmer PhD.
- ▶ Northwest Community Healthcare(NCH)
- ▶ Alexian Brothers Health System

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